

## **“HOW DESPERATE ARE YOU?”**

*Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26*

*Dr. Charles D. Yoost, Senior Pastor*

*June 8, 2008*

Like most men, I have to be really lost before I will stop and ask for directions. I will drive for hours before I admit to myself, let alone to the other people in the car, that I have made a wrong turn or don't really know where I am going. I remember an incident from the first congregation I served as a pastor. We were taking the youth on a hayride. Did I know where I was going? Of course. I'd been to that farm before to visit the family. They occasionally attended our church. Unbeknownst to me, as I drove by the farm house, with several cars following in caravan, the farmer was looking out his living room and saw us drive by. Eventually, realizing that I had missed the house, we turned around and came back down the road. This time the farmer was out at his mailbox to flag us down. A Pastor, he asked with a good-natured grin, "How are you going to lead your congregation to heaven if you can't even find your way to my farm?"

I have to be really lost before I will stop to ask for directions. I have to be really sick before I will go to the doctor. My typical pattern is to wait all week hoping that I'll get better on my own, and then on Friday night or Saturday, after the doctor's office is closed for the weekend, I finally decide I need help. Then, of course, it takes much longer to get the diagnosis and medication that I need.

I have never been desperate for medical attention, although there have been a couple times in my life when I have been close. **ADesperate** means "not caring what happens because hope is gone." A person who is desperate, according to the dictionary, is reckless because he or she has lost hope. As a middle class American, with a wife who is a nurse, I repeat, I have never been desperate for medical attention, but sometimes the pain has been so severe that I have come close.

The people in today's Gospel lesson were desperate. First of all, there was the woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. Did you hear me right? Yes, I said not twelve days, not twelve months, but twelve years. Think back to where you were twelve years ago at this time. Our high school graduates were just completing kindergarten! Our whole children's department hadn't been born yet! Twelve years ago I was living in Mansfield, serving as a District Superintendent. Now think about being sick --- bleeding --- that whole time. This woman was desperate! Wouldn't you be? It's a wonder she was still alive!

Then there's the man who came to Jesus so choked up he could hardly speak. "My daughter has just died," he cried. Is there anything more painful than the loss of a child? Jesus tries to reassure the man that there is still hope, but this guy is desperate. Someone has told him that this Jesus fellow has the power to heal and restore life. He's not sure he believes it, but he is willing to try anything. He is desperate. Anything to save his daughter! Anything to bring her back to life.

Jesus has already had some dramatic effects on people. He has opened blind eyes, he has caused the lame to walk. More significantly, he brought hope to situations where people had long since given up in despair. Not all the changes that Jesus caused were physical. A change of

attitude, a change of heart is even more miraculous than physical healing sometimes, and Jesus was certainly responsible for changing the direction of people=s lives!

Take Matthew, for example. Here was a man who made his living as a tax collector. Not the respected job that working for the Internal Revenue Service connotes today, the commentators tell us that being a tax collector in Jesus= day made you among the lowest of the low. You see, the tax collectors were Jewish people that Rome hired to collect the resented tax from the citizens of this occupied country. Not only was Rome ruling their country, the people had to pay taxes to their oppressors. In essence they were paying for the privilege of being oppressed! One of the commentators states that *Persons in Matthew=s position in those days were ranked somewhere around where we might put terrorists or child molesters.* (1) You get the idea.

So along comes Jesus and invites Matthew to make a career change! When Jesus invites this low life to *Follow me,* which is a jaw dropper itself, the Bible tells us that Matthew gets up, leaves the tax business and follows Jesus! How desperate do you have to be to just walk out on your job, your accumulated paid time off, your health insurance, your 401K and your pension plan? But that=s what Matthew does! Perhaps more miraculous than Matthew walking away from his day job is the fact that Jesus would invite a scoundrel, a low life such as Matthew, to be part of his inner core of followers to begin with! But that=s what Jesus always does, isn=t it? Seeking out desperate people and giving them a new lease on life --- that describes the message and ministry of Jesus.

The woman who had been bleeding for twelve years, the man whose daughter has just died, the tax collector whose life and career was at a dead end --- these are not the only people who are desperate. How many people walk the streets of Cleveland with no roof over their heads and no place to call home? Just two weeks ago our church hosted Interfaith Hospitality Network guests for seven nights. We had two families staying with us: two single moms and five kids. They have hope of getting jobs and a place to live, but until they do, they must move from church to church, not knowing who will host them each night and what the accommodations will be. It is a difficult life, to say the least.

Across the ocean, Somali refugees have fled to where they can find some peace and a means of survival. Their presence has led to strife in other African countries, where they are perceived to be taking business, jobs and services away from other residents. In South Africa, Somalis operating small shops have been attacked and even murdered around Capetown. *Desperate people do desperate things,* an analyst at the South African Institute for Race Relations commented.(2)

So many people in our day are desperately ill with cancer. Little two year old Laura Hart in England has undergone chemotherapy, but the tumors are still present in her body. She has undergone relentless therapy since her diagnosis, and her family is now pinning their hopes on a new drug that has been tested in North America. Fifteen year old leukemia sufferer Matthew Fletcher and his family had thought that a near-perfect match had been found for a bone marrow transplant. Then the donor pulled out at the last minute. The family rallied again, and decided to proceed with his mother=s marrow C at 50%, far less desirable than the departed donor, but a chance for a mother to save her desperately ill son.(3)

How desperate do you have to be before you will turn to others for help? How desperate do you have to be in order to accept the healing touch of Jesus? Those who have been helped by Alcoholics Anonymous know that the first condition to join A.A. is to make the statement that the person is powerless over alcohol. Sometimes we need to hit bottom before we can see the need for help and hope. Sometimes we have to be desperate before we will open ourselves to the healing touch of Jesus.

Many watch the popular television show, *Desperate Housewives*.<sup>4</sup> The desperation of these women mirrors so much of what is taking place in our society today. We are a society in desperate need of something to ground us when the going gets rough, when the bottom falls out. The tax collector, the sick woman, the man whose daughter had just died turned to Jesus. Will we? Will our society? What will it take to get us to see that happiness does not come from the next pill, the next bottle, the next new toy, the next affair, the next acquisition, the next relationship, but from a face to face encounter with Jesus and a willingness to put our faith and trust in him?

Now I have to be careful how I make this next statement, for I would not want anyone to get the wrong idea. I wouldn't wish a calamity or a tragedy or illness or disease on anyone. I would not for a minute want to see anyone homeless or in poverty or suffering in any way. But sometimes, desperation can be a blessing in disguise. Yes, I said that desperation can be a blessing in disguise, for when we are desperate, when we have nothing to lose, we finally have the nerve to do desperate things. When Matthew the tax collector got to the end of his rope, he threw in the towel and followed Jesus. When the woman who was bleeding for twelve years finally saw the possibility of being healed of her illness, she reached out to Jesus. When the man whose little girl died had nowhere else to turn, he turned to Jesus. What will it take for you to turn your life over to the One who can bring healing and wholeness and joy to your life? I hope and pray that it does not take tragedy or catastrophe or illness or great loss in order for you to give your heart to him.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, who wrote *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, reflected on the death of his son. He said, "I am a more sensitive person, a more effective pastor, a more sympathetic counselor because of Aaron's life and death than I ever would have been without it. I would give up all those gains in a second if I could have my son back. If I could choose, I would forego all of the spiritual growth and depth which has come my way because of my experience, but I cannot choose."<sup>4</sup>

When the Pharisees question why Jesus is eating with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus replies, *"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."*<sup>4</sup> The implication is that the tax collectors and sinners realize their need for God. They are desperate! The Pharisees, on the other hand, do not realize how sick they are! The truth is that without Jesus we are all desperate housewives and desperate husbands. Without Jesus, we are all desperate people. Without Jesus we have no hope for the future. What was needed in Jesus' day and what is needed in our day is the healing touch of Jesus. If we will just reach out and touch him, like the woman in our story did, we can be healed. If we will just bring the areas of our lives that are dead to the feet of Jesus, he will breathe new life into them. If we will just bring our careers to Jesus, he will give us the focus and the direction that we need. The question

is: how desperate do we have to be? How bad does it have to get before we will yield our stubborn wills to Jesus? Will we wait until all other hope is gone before we will turn to him?

This morning we have a feast spread out before us. All the spiritual food we need is right here on this altar. Jesus is ready to have dinner once again with tax collectors and sinners C right here in Cleveland Heights! Whether desperate or not, he invites us to pull up a chair! Yes, there=s a place card with your name on it, and one with mine. We are invited to eat and drink with Jesus, to join in the feast that God has prepared for you and for me and for the entire human race.

While I resist going to the doctor, the truth is that without the healing touch of Jesus, I don=t have a prayer. Some days I delude myself into thinking I can make it on my own. I don=t need to stop and ask for directions from anybody. But when I am thinking straight, I realize that I need the healing touch of Jesus in order to live the life that God intends for me. Some days I do better than others! Most days I am aware that without Jesus, I really have no future at all.

What about you? How desperate do you have to be in order to seek help? Are you desperate enough today to reach out to the one who heals? Won=t you come to Jesus? **How desperate are you?**

*Prayer:* Dear God, some of us are sicker than others. Some of us are more discouraged than others. Some of us are more depressed than others. But the truth is, all of us are desperate for you. Help us to reach out and accept the healing touch of Jesus. Help us to realize our deep need for you. We pray in Jesus= name. Amen.

Notes:

1. *Awaken: The Art of Imaginative Preaching*. Pentecost 1 2008, Year A., p. 18.
2. *The Clergy Journal*. Vol. 83. No. 7., p. 121.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Quoted in Post, Stephen and Jill Neimark. *Why Good Things Happen to Good People*. New York: Random House, 2007., p. 121.